

Interview with Meyer ZALC on June 28th, 2022 in Brussels, Belgium

2 hours 9 minutes 56 seconds

Meyer (“Marcel”) ZALC was born on April 21st, 1938, in the Ixelles district of Brussels, Belgium to Herz Jehudah ZALC and Fajga Hinda NAJMILLER. Herz was a tailor and had emigrated to Antwerp from Błaszki, Poland in the 1920’s. His mother had emigrated with her family to Antwerp at the age of 12 from Łodz and became a skilled seamstress. Her father Moshe NAJMILLER, also a tailor, was a religious Jew and Meyer’s earliest memories are of this loving and affectionate man. Meyer had a brother Isaac (“Jacques”), 18 months older than he.

The Zalc’s were “*traditionnalistes*” – they respected the Jewish holidays. They spoke either Polish or Yiddish at home.

After the round-ups of Jews in Antwerp in August, 1942, the Zalc’s were advised to place their children elsewhere. Meyer’s mother did not trust the official AJB (*Association des Juifs de Belgique*) and sought another place. Meyer thinks that one of his parent’s clients, a Professor Georges, may have suggested the Convent of the Sisters of Saint Vincent de Paul in Louvain.

Meyer has few memories before October, 1942, when his mother took a train with him and his brother to Louvain, and as night was falling, rang the bell in front of a massive wooden door at the entrance, then pushed her two sons inside. Meyer remembers the violence of that moment and how he screamed and cried until exhaustion set in. He was separated even from his brother.

This institution was a place where children who had been abused by their families were sent, so many of the boys had problems themselves. Most of them were Catholic and blond-haired. Some other children (about 12) probably Jewish, were there for a few weeks before escaping to Switzerland or elsewhere with their families. He, his brother, a boy named Joseph Novack, and another boy were the only Jewish boys who stayed there for a long period of time, but at the time, they did not know that the others were Jewish.

The Sister in charge, Sister H el ene Baggen, known as “Soeur Leen” (later, recognized as a “Just among the Nations”), sensing he would be unhappy, took Meyer aside and explained his situation: because he was “different” from the other boys, he had to be careful not to speak because his accent was not the same. She taught him the fear that was necessary for self-preservation. He and his brother were given new names: Marcel van Zalck and Jacques van Zalck, which sounded more Flemish.

Apparently, the boys were baptized, although it seems that there were no certificates to prove this, and they attended mass. They said grace before meals and Meyer enjoyed being a choir boy. He did not go to confession. Sister Leen never pronounced the word “Jewish” but said that he had a different religion. From then on, Meyer became practically mute and kept his distance from the others.

Meanwhile, in September, 1943, both his parents were rounded-up in the street, probably identified by a Jewish collaborationist called “*Le Gros Jacques*”, and sent to the *Kazerne Dossin*. Most people did not spend more than 2 weeks there, but on three occasions, his parents were placed on the list for a convoy headed to Auschwitz and their names were removed at the last minute, so they ended-up spending 13 months there. No one ever found out why this was so: his parents were excellent tailors, and Nazi officers particularly prized his mother’s skills at ironing and mending their uniforms. However, Meyer speculates that Professor Georges, who was close to Queen Elizabeth, Leopold III’s mother, might have intervened. At one point, the Flemish guards who worked at the

Kazerne found some rations Herz had stashed away and practically beat him to death. He was “liberated” in October, 1944, carried out on a stretcher. He died in a hospital in February, 1945.

Meyer does not remember how he spent his time at the convent in Louvain, but he did not learn to read or write. His parents sent money for their sons’ upkeep until their arrest in 1943, so in February, 1944, so Meyer surmises that the Sisters must have contacted the AJB to receive some money to help. (That is the first time that the Zalc boys were noted in the AJB registers.) When his mother came to reclaim her sons in October, 1944, Meyer did not recognize his brother or his mother. She was in terrible health, emaciated and haggard. Meyer, taciturn and distrustful, suffered from malnutrition himself. His brother was consumed by a violent rage.

The Zalc family went to live with his mother’s sister, her husband, and their children in Brussels. There was not enough room or food to go around, so 2 months after being reunited with their parents, the boys were sent away yet again, entrusted to a Jewish children’s home in Lasne. Although still timid, Meyer remembers a feeling of liberation – of being able to talk and go out without fear of being arrested. Many of the other children there were orphans, having also gone through traumatic experiences.

Meyer remembers two people who were important to him there: Madame Friedman, the cook, who was kind and loving to all the children, and Siegi Hirsch¹, who survived Auschwitz and came back to become one of the outstanding child therapists in post-war Belgium, specializing in the use of art and music to allow the children to express themselves.

His mother had only one goal –to make enough money so she could leave her sister’s apartment rent a place where she could take her sons, and start a home again. He says that his childhood memories of his mother were mainly of her back, bent over her sewing machine, until late at night. Finding a place to rent was not easy in post-war Belgium, where signs “*Etrangers s’abstenir*” (Foreigners – do not apply) were found everywhere.

During the years the boys were in the home at Lasne, Fajga was also waiting for her husband’s brother Leon, who had immigrated to the United States from Poland before the war, to send a small amount of money to the U.S. Embassy in Brussels as a guarantee that the family would not become an economic burden after they arrived in the States. She had arranged the appropriate papers, but the money never arrived.²

Resentment and incomprehension reigned in their household, with Isaac taking the lead in making their mother miserable. The reply when Meyer asked where his father or grandparents had gone was simply, “*Morts*” (They died.) He remembers that a group of widows often met with his mother. Some were camp survivors and recounted what they had been through. His mother was so poor, she could not even pay to go to a doctor. A kind and generous Dr. Guyot often treated her for free.

The brothers attended the local public school in Uccle, a district of Brussels, but Meyer had received no preparation and was placed with boys his age who had already had several years of primary school. He has a vivid memory of refusing to answer when one of his teachers insisted on addressing him as “Meyer” and not “Marcel” - and he explains why.

¹ Siegi Hirsch is highly-praised in the interviews of other traumatized Belgian children: Ariel Potasznik and Lise Reiter.

² Meyer recounts how he arrived in NYC many years later, called and spoke to his uncle in Yiddish, asking simply to meet his relative, assuring him that he was not there to ask for money. His uncle refused and hung up.

Because of the strong antisemitism³ in post-war Belgium, they stayed within their community to form friendships or socialize, joining several Jewish youth organizations – the left-leaning *Hashomer Hatzair* and then, the more right-leaning *Hanouar Hatzioni*.

The family struggled to make ends meet and could not celebrate the boys' bar mitzvahs. They did not graduate from elementary school and entered high school (called the "Athénée") but left at the age of about 14 to make a living. Meyer was sent to a school to learn hairdressing and then became an apprentice, while Isaac learned to be a tailor. Both the brothers tried a number of professions.

At one point, the brothers set-up their own business making leather garments and then sold it to enter the diamond trade in Antwerp, where both of them learned their profession while working for others. Meyer became a "cleaver" (explained in the interview) and started a successful career.

He met his future wife, Gisèle Wallach, through his sister-in-law. She was born in Leipzig and was a hidden child in Tervuren during the war. Gisèle's father survived Auschwitz. They founded a family and from this point on, Meyer felt more stable. He had always lived from moment to moment and now, he was thinking of the future. He speaks of recognizing many of the emotions and situations that the psychiatrist and ethologist Boris Cyrulnik develops when writing about "resilience".

One of the consequences of Meyer's own traumatic childhood followed him into adulthood – his constant fear for his own sons and his attention to every detail of their upbringing. He never spoke to them about his own suffering or what had happened.

Meyer notes that many survivors, even prominent members of the Jewish community, rarely spoke about their experiences for over 20 years. People often questioned them with suspicion, wondering what they had done to survive, implying that it was something unethical.....

He has read extensively and done research in archives, trying to understand why certain events occurred. He also has been actively involved in several associations related to Jewish community during the war, especially the "*Association pour la restitution des biens volés aux Juifs*".

Meyer explains that after many years of work by a government commission, in 2005, the Belgian government decided upon an unfairly small token sum to compensate victims. After years of combat, the association achieved their goal ("*Solidarité 3000*") and each victim received a minimum of 3,000 euros. The association is now dedicated to the Memory of the Shoah and actively involved with schools. Meyer and another hidden child, Bella Swiatlowski⁴, often bear witness in classrooms together. The association has organized trips to the Memorial to the Children of Izieu in France, where the children were rounded-up and deported by the war criminal, Klaus Barbie, taking students from disadvantaged neighborhoods like Mollenbeek, where the population is mainly of Arab-Muslim descent, and their teachers.

He is also involved in an association which places nameplates on pavement stones (inspired by Gunter Demnig's *Stolpersteine* or *Pavés de la mémoire*) to honor Jews who lived there before the war and were deported.

Meyer feels that the wounds from his broken childhood have nearly healed, which makes him particularly sensitive and committed to helping today's children grow into responsible adults.

³ He gives examples of this pervasive antisemitism in postwar Belgium and how his brother was ready to fight anyone who expressed this. A vigil at the *Palais des Beaux Arts* once refused to let the adolescents and their friends enter, saying when they protested, "With you Jews, it's always the same problem....!"

⁴ Also interviewed in Brussels on June 26, 2022.